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House of Representatives

The House was not in session today. Its next meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 7, 2023, at 12 p.m.

Senate

MONDAY, MARCH 6, 2023

The Senate met at 3 p.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mrs. MURRAY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal spirit, King of kings, and Lord of lords, we thank You today for the gift of this opportunity to serve You and country. Give us the wisdom to invest our lives in things that flourish beyond our lifetime.

Lord, guide our lawmakers. May the reality of their accountability to You prompt them to live their lives for Your glory. Empower our Senators to listen to the whisper of conscience as they labor for liberty. May their first priority be to stay within the circle of Your loving providence.

Lord, give all of us the power to fulfill Your purposes for our lives. We pray in your powerful name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the following nomination which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of Robert Stewart Ballou, of Virginia, to be United States District Judge for the Western District of Virginia.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

KENTUCKY

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, this past weekend, the people of Kentucky endured significant severe weather. The storms that ripped through the Commonwealth on Friday caused mass power outages, localized flooding, and high winds that reached up to 75 miles an hour. At least one tornado was recorded in west Kentucky.

Sadly, the storms have taken the lives of five Kentuckians. Elaine and I send our deepest condolences to the families who are grieving their lost loved ones. My office has been in close contact with Governor Beshear's team and local officials across the State. Emergency response efforts are work-

ing overtime to ensure those impacted have the resources to make a rapid recovery.

At peak, there were more than half a million households without power. I am grateful to the linemen and chainsaw teams that have tirelessly worked around the clock to restore power throughout the State. A number of school districts remain closed today as power restoration efforts continue.

So thank you to all the first responders who have graciously deployed without hesitation. The generosity and resilience on display in the on-the-ground operations have been truly inspiring. Throughout the Commonwealth, Kentuckians are rolling up their sleeves to help where they can, whether it is assisting clean-up efforts with chainsaws in hand or opening their homes to those in need. Kentuckians have both big hearts and hard knuckles, and together, we will get through.

My prayers are with all the storm victims and their families, and I stand ready to assist with our swift recovery in the days ahead.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Now, Madam President, on an entirely different matter, a number of Senate Republican colleagues and I recently met with America's allies and partners across Europe and the Middle East. I spoke last week about our message to NATO and our friends in Europe. How the West confronts Russia's invasion of Ukraine today will shape the future with respect to, not just Russia, but China and Iran as well.

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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Of course, these same adversaries are aggressively working to counter American influence in the Middle East. We met with top leaders in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE; and a great deal of what we saw was very encouraging. America has many friends in the Middle East.

The Abraham Accords are uniting Arabs and Israelis to a degree that would have been literally unthinkable 15 or 20 years ago—and uniting them around shared interests with our own. Our partners want even stronger relations with the United States, but the problem is that, just like in Europe, our friends are questioning America's reliability and America's commitment.

Our partners are not asking us to take care of their security for them. They want a confident and engaged America to coordinate more closely with them and help them upgrade their own defenses.

If America disengages from the Middle East, some of our partners will, of course, turn to other major powers. A world in which China and Russia exert more influence in this pivotal region is not good for America.

Yet too often, this administration has turned to the Obama-era playbook of flirting with our adversaries rather siding with our friends. President Biden began his administration trying to dismantle the successful maximum pressure campaign on Iran that he inherited. Less than 2 weeks into the job, he made Iran's day by removing the official terrorist designation of the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Iran is the world's most active state sponsor of terror. It was continuing its shameless years-long targeting of America's partners and our own U.S. personnel in the region. But right from the jump, President Biden took pressure off Tehran.

Then the Biden administration tried desperately to reassemble the wreckage of the failed Obama-era Iran deal, which was, of course, all carrots and no sticks. Then the President ignored the concerns of both our commanders and partners in ordering the disastrous retreat from Afghanistan. At crucial moments, President Biden has made decisions that have undermined confidence in America.

For example, when an Iran-sponsored attack struck the capital of the UAE, it didn't occur to the Biden administration to send anybody to stand in solidarity with our friends. Our friends didn't expect an American military response, but they certainly deserved at least a phone call.

Our friends from Saudi Arabia to Qatar to the UAE have made major investments in their military facilities to facilitate America's military presence and access, which contributes to deterrence of common adversaries. The botched retreat from Afghanistan has made these basing agreements even more vital, if we wish to maintain any remotely effective way to conduct counterterrorism in the region.

And the Abraham Accords pointed to a new and enormously beneficial chap-

ter for American involvement in the Middle East where we could stay engaged and keep promoting our interests in the region, without shouldering an outsized burden. But on President Biden's watch, we have squandered much of the momentum.

Democrats have sought to keep shrinking our influence and credibility in the Middle East. They have objected to arms transfers that would let our friends better prepare to defend themselves against common enemies. So, look, protecting America and our interests takes power, it takes presence, and, most importantly, it takes partners.

It is true in Europe. It is true in the Indo-Pacific. And it is true in the Middle East. Power, presence, and partners.

But President Biden's attempts to underfund our Armed Forces with inadequate budgets would reduce our power. His clumsy attempts to cut and run from the Middle East have reduced our presence, and letting key friendships languish erodes our partnerships. It is a recipe—a recipe for less American influence, less national security, and a vacuum—a vacuum—that Russia and China would, of course, be delighted to fill.

The Biden administration needs to get more serious toward Iran. The President says he won't allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. Does anyone believe that? Iran inches closer and closer to a bomb while the administration dithers. After 2 years of squandered leverage, the administration finally admits their foolish negotiations with Iran are “on life support”—on life support. Well, it is past time to pull the plug.

We need to rally American allies in a campaign of coordinated sanctions. Maximum pressure on Tehran, for real. We need to closely coordinate with our Middle East friends, not keep them in the dark. We need to help Israel acquire the capabilities it needs to put Iran's nuclear program at credible risk. We need to clear roadblocks that prevent our partners from acquiring the superior American weapons and technologies that they need to defend themselves. That means reforming our broken, bureaucratic, and convoluted foreign military sales process.

Right now, it takes our partners an average of 18 months—listen to this—18 months just to put American weapons under contract. Our friends are literally trying to buy American, but we are making it more difficult. We need to streamline the process and ensure we do not drive our friends to buy weapons faster, cheaper, and easier from the Chinese. And the next time Iran's proxies attack American outposts in Syria or Iraq, we need to hit back hard and restore the deterrence that has eroded.

So, Madam President, some people seem to have a mistaken impression that America can project more strength in one region by protecting

weakness in other regions. The notion is that an America in retreat from Europe and/or the Middle East will somehow—somehow—magically have a stronger hand to play in Asia. That is not the way the world works.

If America were to roll over and let Putin eat our strategic lunch in Europe, if we were to abandon our friends in the Middle East and let China and Russia strategically dominate this important region, none of this—none of it—would put America in a stronger position to assemble and lead the international effort that it will take to confront the long-term expansion of China and others. It would only weaken us.

America has strong friends who want to continue to take our side over China's and Russia's. The administration needs to stop making it harder for them and start making it easier.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I have a few statements I would like to make this morning, but I would like to respond to the Republican leader's statement that he just completed.

I am not naive when it comes to Iran. I know what is happening there from press reports. Their treatment of women is abominable. There is no excuse for it. And the protests in the streets of Tehran and all across that country really are an expression of human dignity which the United States—at least I as a Senator in the United States—supports publicly.

Secondly, there are no excuses for the assistance Iran is giving to Vladimir Putin and his ruthless attack on the people of Ukraine. I won't make excuses for that or any other terrorist conduct by Iran.

But for the record—for the record—it was President Obama who moved forward with the notion that we ought to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. They are guilty of bad conduct in many quarters, but we didn't want them to have a nuclear weapon. We didn't think it made America any safer, the Middle East safer, or our allies like Israel any safer either.

So President Obama pushed for an arms control when it came to the development of nuclear weapons, and Iran had put together a coalition which sounds amazing today. To think that he could gather at one table in this effort—Russia, China, Great Britain, France, the European Union, and the United States in this effort to stop the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon was nothing short of a political miracle.

It was resisted every step of the way by the Republicans. They didn't want to have this. We did it anyway. And with this nuclear effort was an inspection team—an international inspection team—on the ground in Iran to make sure they didn't violate it. We were safer—not by much, but we were safer then. And then who came along but President Donald Trump who said his approach would be just the opposite.

We are going to eliminate the whole program to stop Iran from developing a nuclear program, and he did.

So for the Republicans to come before us today and argue that we are not being tough enough on Iran, I would like to tell them that I am not going to make excuses for Iran and its foreign policy. But there are nuclear weapons we had a chance to do something about, and some of us voted for it, some of us voted against it. I think that ought to be a matter of public record.

HONORING OFFICER ANDRES VASQUEZ-LASSO

Madam President, on a separate subject matter, the city of Chicago, which I represent, is a city in mourning today.

Last Thursday, Chicago police officer Andres Vasquez-Lasso was killed while responding to a domestic violence 911 call that ended in a chase and an exchange of gunfire with the suspect. Officer Vasquez-Lasso was 32 years old. He had been on the police force for 5 years. He is married. The man accused of killing him is 18 years old.

Officer Vasquez-Lasso had chased this man a short distance on foot when the man reportedly turned on him, pointed a gun at him, and killed him. That chase ended on the playground of an elementary school in the city of Chicago where neighborhood kids were playing. As the bullets flew, the children took cover under slides and other playground equipment. Officer Vasquez-Lasso was shot three times—in the arm, leg, and head.

He was the first Chicago police officer killed in the line of duty since Officer Ella French was murdered 18 months ago during a traffic stop. They had a memorial service for Officer French. My wife and I went to it. It was at St. Rita High School in the Beverly section of Chicago. I have never seen a larger outpouring of men and women in uniform come and pay tribute to this officer who was killed in a traffic stop.

I was there with my wife, and we had a personal feeling about the occasion once we went inside, saw her family, and heard more about her life. I got to know her mom. And when the time came, we picked a program to help police across the United States, and we are working to name it after her in her honor for serving not only the city of Chicago but the country in protecting us. Sadly, here we are again.

Officer Vasquez-Lasso just didn't protect the Southwest Side neighborhood where he served. He actually lived there. He and his wife had bought a home only 2 and a half miles from where he was killed about a year and a half ago. And I want to say clearly for the record something that needs to be said: Officer Vasquez-Lasso was an immigrant to this country. He came here from Colombia. He became a citizen and became a police officer, and he gave his life for the people who live in this country.

On this Wednesday night, police officers, other first responders, and com-

munity members lined the streets to salute the ambulance carrying his body as it drove slowly from the hospital where he died to the county medical examiner's office.

On Thursday, black bunting draped the entrance to the 8th district headquarters where Officer Vasquez-Lasso was assigned. Several vigils have been held around the city of Chicago since his death. The largest was a candlelight prayer vigil Thursday evening in Hale Park, attended by the officer's wife and mother. Hundreds of police officers, community members, and friends came out to pay their respects. A friend at the prayer vigil recalled that Officer Vasquez-Lasso was "always a proper man." A fellow officer said, "He was always smiling."

Today, a memorial stands on the block where he was shot down. People drop off flowers and notes and other tributes. A rosary hangs on the fence. Illinois Governor J.P. Pritzker has ordered all flags in our State to fly at half-staff until Officer Vasquez-Lasso is laid to rest on Thursday.

These are especially difficult times to be a member of law enforcement. A growing arsenal of high-powered guns in the hands of criminals and domestic abusers makes policing more dangerous than it has ever been. Domestic violence calls are always fraught with danger for police, victims, and innocent people standing by.

At the suspect's bail hearing, Judge Mary Marubio noted that danger when she said:

This case, from start to finish, it begins in violence and it ends in violence.

The director of a local domestic violence prevention organization said, "Your heart breaks because it was all so preventable."

Madam President, for the sake of law enforcement officers who protect our communities and the victims of violence, we must do more to break the cycle of violence that kills far too many and leaves many more scarred. We must—must—do more to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and others who flatly should not have them.

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act that Congress passed last year in the wake of the horrific Uvalde school shooting made important progress, but more is needed to protect our communities and our law enforcement officers.

In closing, I want to offer my condolences to Officer Vasquez-Lasso's family, especially his wife Milena Estepa, his mother Rocio Lasso, his sister, and niece, as well as his fellow officers in the Chicago Police Department, and his many, many friends.

Officer Vasquez-Lasso gave his life protecting his community. He was protecting the children on that playground and the families living in the community that he personally called home.

We join the city of Chicago in saluting his courage and mourning his loss.

PRESCRIPTION DRUG COSTS

Madam President, last week, pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly announced that it was going to lower the price of its insulin product. It is called Humalog. They are going to lower it dramatically by 70 percent and cap the out-of-pocket costs for insulin at \$35 a month. After two decades of price gouging, this is a major relief for more than 7 million patients—more than 200,000 living in my State of Illinois—who depend on insulin every day to stay alive.

But, despite the importance of this announcement, I won't be sending thank-you cards to the executives of this pharmaceutical company. You see, it was a century ago—100 years ago—when basic forms of insulin were discovered. The Nobel Prize-winning researchers who pioneered that discovery surrendered the patent rights—their property rights—in this new discovery for \$1. Why? To prevent profiteering on this lifesaving medication.

Now fast-forward almost 100 years to 1996. Eli Lilly introduces its insulin drug Humalog. They set the price of a vial of this insulin at \$21. It made sense, as it only cost a few dollars to manufacture. But in the years since 1996, Eli Lilly prioritized profits over patients. The same vial of insulin that Eli Lilly first sold for \$21 was now being sold for \$300. Eli Lilly raised the price more than 30 separate times.

What happened to the same drug, made by the same company, sold in Canada? It was only \$40. But it was \$300 in the United States. Is it any wonder that Eli Lilly generated more than \$22 billion in revenue from insulin alone in 2014 and 2018?

Let me repeat that. There was \$22 billion in revenue during that 4-year period.

Let's be clear. During the same time, Eli Lilly spent \$1.5 billion on sales and marketing for insulin. Try to turn on the television set and get away with not seeing a pharmaceutical commercial from this company and so many others. Eli Lilly spent four times more than it spent on research for marketing this product and others.

The company's profit-taking on this life-or-death drug has had deadly consequences. When the price went up to \$300 a month, many people just couldn't afford it. More than 1 million Americans report having to ration or cut back doses of insulin—an extremely dangerous gamble.

I received a letter from one of my constituents from Palos Park, who faced that. His name is Phil. He is 73 years old. Phil told me he has had to skip insulin injections because of the cost. He wrote that he was "anxiously awaiting lower prescription prices."

Well, there is good news for Phil and a lot of other Americans. You don't have to wait any longer. Last year, the Democrats lowered the cost of prescription drugs.

Why didn't I say that the Senate lowered the cost? Because not a single Republican would vote for it—not one.